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GLIMPSES OF CALIFORNIA, 1860-61  
WILLIAM CARROLL

(Letters Furnished by Miss Harriette Saxton)

William Carroll was graduated from Geneva College (now Hobart) sometime in the forties, and had been a practicing physician for several years in the village of Gilberts Mills, N. Y. His health becoming precarious, he decided to leave his wife and three small children and to seek health and wealth in that El Dorado to which so many young men were going at that time.

The following letters were written to his sister and her husband, Ann and William Buck, of Merridian, N. Y.:

Salmon Falls, Cal., May 1, 1860.

My dear sister Ann:

You cannot imagine with what satisfaction I rec'd your letter which came to hand today. I rec'd one from my own folks at the same time which quieted my fears very much as I had written to them five times since I started to Cal. I believe I wrote to you just before I reached Aspinwall. I suppose that it would be as interesting to you as anything to hear the events of the sea voyage.

. . . We arrived at Aspinwall Monday, 8 days after we left N. York City, stopped awhile and rested our weary limbs in the shade for it is very hot there. There is a small place of some 300 or 400 inhabitants, a mixture of Spanish and Indian and Negro. There is an abundance of tropical fruit here of all kinds. The natives appear very friendly and are constantly asking you to buy in very imploring terms saying "Buy or-an-ges, sweety, buy or-an-ges, sweety, buy a glass of lemonade, sweety, cool lemonade". The cocoa tree is the most beautiful tree that I ever saw. The palm grows here in great abundance likewise the orange and lemon.

The railroad here must have been constructed at a great sacrifice of human life, running as it does along the sluggish stream, the Chargres River, then through swampy jungles where the vegetation is so thick that no man would think of getting through without cutting his road as he went.

At many places along the rout there are many negro villages if they may be called such, the rudest constructed houses you ever saw. A few posts driven into (the) ground and a simple thatched roof comprises all of the architecture you see, all open at the sides or a little bark set up or matting hung up to keep out the hot sun. These natives have no beds or furniture in their houses. they sleep on the ground and are very indolent in their habits. . . . the

females are most fantastically dressed in calico that red forms the largest figure.

We crossed the Isthmus, a distance of 48 miles, in three hours. Got aboard the splendid steamer, *Golden Age*, at sundown in Panama Bay. This is an old place, it is composed of the old town and the new town, the old part plainly bears the marks of antiquity. Its crumbling and dilapidated walls, its monasteries which are in the best state of preservation, its battlements and fortified garrison plainly show that this was once quite a town some time in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It was taken by General Bollivar 1798 and belongs to New Granada.

Five and one-half days brought us to Acapulco a small but very safe harbor that lies behind the hills. We saw nothing of the place until we were upon it. At a small opening in the rocky coast the steamer makes a few turns in a winding tortuous course and you are in a small bay where the wind was never known to blow, high mountains on every side. Here we see Acapulco.

The steamer cannot get up to a dock, anchors in the bay. Now for a chase. At the approach of a steamer, the natives start in their boats, and he is the lucky fellow that can get there first. Seventy-five to a hundred start in skiffs laden with all kinds of fruit, bread, sugar, whiskey, coral, fowls, hogs, tobacco, cigars, turtles, etc., etc., and such a confusion and tongues you never heard. Suffice to say that we traded some \$2000 in the short space of three hours, took on coal and water, and put out to sea again the same night. . . .

Seven days sail from Acapulco brought us into San Francisco. This is a place of some importance, but not a handsome place. It is built on a hillside and uneven surface. Here you are reminded of New York Harbor from the amount of shipping. Flags of all nations are floating from the mast-heads. A stranger is not in half the danger here of having his pockets rifled as he would be in New York.

Our Company left together, and after staying one day here, started for Sacramento. There is the greatest attraction here for a greeny to lose his money in the world. Splendid gambling saloons fitted up in the most costly style, and rich music salutes the ear. The Dutch and French own these establishments.

We got aboard the splendid steamer *Antelope*, and arrived the same day at Sacramento without money or friends. We enquired of this one and that one for a location, but finally ventured alone on foot, and, weary with travel, found a friend who proved a friend indeed. We stayed at his house one week and rested our weary limbs, and when I came away he put a twenty dollar gold piece in my pocket, and would take no promise of pay, but said he had done no more than what he should expect of another in like circumstances. I had never seen this man before. He likewise said if I wanted a

hundred dollars I could have it. This is a specimen of the liberality of California.

I traveled up and down the mountains a few days, and have finally pitched my tent here for the season. I am teaching a small district school. I have eight to twelve scholars. I get a salary of \$60.00 for the month of twenty-two days. I could have done much better in a larger town, but there is no Doctor within ten miles, and a part of the season quite sickly. . . .

I do not expect that I shall dig in the mines. There is a considerable done in this locality, but mostly by Chinamen. You may stretch the imagination to its utmost extent, and you will come far short of comprehending the amount of labor done here for gold. Hundreds, yes thousands of acres have been turned over and over again and again, and now John Chinaman is at it, and many times gets paid; but the kind that pays here now is deep tunnelling and hydraulics claims for quartz to yield well, but all this kind of mining requires experience and a large capital. . . .

Ann, this is the most beautiful climate in the world. The days are quite hot even now, but at night a person wants three good blankets. We are going to have an abundant harvest. Wheat is nearly all headed out, and will be fit to cut in a few weeks. Barley is very stout. Fruit is in abundance, even apples and pears, and no country can equal this in peaches, plums, cherries, apricots, figs and the like. Thousands of acres are covered by these fruits, especially the peach. The grape does extraordinarily well here. They are manufacturing wine here that equals the French. Another feature of the country, they have no frost. Cattle get their living the year around, as well as sheep and horses. There is no kind of barns here nor cellars. There is no such finished farm houses here as you have there, nor indeed do they require it. Instead of lathing and plastering, the houses are lined inside with bleached Factory Cloth, which give them a very tidy appearance, and render them very comfortable, and some are whitewashed if they get soiled or smoky. . . .

Salmon Falls, June 27th, 1860.

My dear sister Ann Buck:

. . . I am teaching school here yet. I am getting good wages, \$3.00 per day, and shall teach six months at that rate. I am doing a small amount of medical business. It is very healthy here at present, and no great amount to do except in curing Delirium Tremens. I have had two cases, one being a merchant by the name of Thomas Brown, of Wayne County, N. Y. The other was an old soaker from Missouri. This is a great place for amusement. Balls, horse racing, drinking, is considered no disgrace until a man is completely ruined, and then they say, "Let him go, the sooner the better". Not much sympathy expressed here. There have been

some seventy-five strangers buried here in ten years, and not a funeral sermon has ever been preached in the place. Shame that men will become so debased, and lose all those finer and ennobling qualities that characterize the Christian from the Heathen. There is a vast more feeling manifested among Celestials, for they not only bury their dead decently, but place a jug of Brandy and a dish of good rice in his coffin, but set up the most dismal wailing, and sooner or later disinter him, and take him back to his Fatherland.

The people of California are very impulsive and generous even to a fault in many things. My first term used up all of the public money they had in the Treasury, and they wanted to keep me another Quarter, and I will tell you how they earned the funds. They got up a party here and sold tickets to the amount of \$130; had it at a private house (a Southern Blood); held a dance in the new school-house; put up a bar under a large oak tree in school yard; sold champagne and wine, ginger beer and lager, lemonade and ice cream, to the amount of nearly a hundred more. Do you think I attended? You say, "No", but I did though. I did not calculate to go near, but a delegation of ladies was appointed to wait on me if I did not go willingly, but by adroitness I managed to slip away about midnight, and went to bed leaving them alone with their glory. It cost me \$8.00, and I neither danced or drank during the evening, but I could not get rid of it, and so let slide. They seemed to enjoy it very much, but I felt guilty all the time I was there, and had it not been got up for my benefit, should not have attended. Everybody here expects the Doctor to attend all such sprees, but I think this is my last, whether I get employment or not. There is to be a picnic on the 4th of July, and I expect to attend, but this is to be a temperance party, as they are willing to let me have my own way about the management of it. . . .

I am very contented. I do not have to labor hard. I have only fifteen scholars, and I never earned \$100 so easy in my life. I am teaching a Sabbath School of about fifteen boys and girls. They are very good in attendance, and appear to learn well. They are nearly as ignorant as their parents of the Bible, but a vast more tractable, and willing to learn, but religion in California is quite different than what it is in New York. A kind of religion that will let a man drink all the whiskey he can pour down and break the Sabbath every week, is the kind they have here, and it is not uncommon for the minister to join in their parties, and take carnal delight in them. We have preaching here occasionally by the M. E. P. denomination. He is quite smart but lacks many things to make up a true shepherd. The people turn out very well and pay due respect when in meeting, but oh the power of habit in evil associations. How quick a man loses his vows and love of religion. In this land crime and gold mammon is very apt to choke the good

seed sown in the best soil unless watered by the healing streams of salvation. . . .

Upon reading my letter, William, I find I have not said much to you, and so I add this. You could do well here on ten acres of good land, make more than double the money you can off your farm in raising ducks, turkeys, and pigs and hens. Hens sell readily at the door for \$1.25 apiece, ducks \$2.00, turkeys \$5.00, hogs 10c per pound live weight, geese \$3.00 to \$4.00 apiece, eggs 50c to 75c per dozen. This is true as preaching.

I think I shall spend the remainder of my days in California. Such a climate you cannot form much of an idea of. I think when I come after my family, you had better come out.

*Note*—By this time the fascination of the country had taken hold of the Doctor. He says in his next letter, which is dated:

Secret Ravine, December 29th, 1860.

Dear Sister:

. . . I love this climate, the most pleasant in the world. It is now near the first of the second winter month, and we have mild days. The hills and valleys look green. It is true we have had more rain this month than common, which has caused a great flood in the Sacramento Valley. The city has been so flooded that steamers could sail all over the lower part. The American River raised 55 feet in two days, carried away nearly all the bridges, and is doing immense damage to the mines. There is quite a complaint of the miners that the late freshets have filled up their claims, and made them a great deal of unnecessary labor, and there is quite a scarcity of provisions up in the country owing to the flood in Sacramento. They have to use boats to go from one street to another. The water pours through the streets like a vast river, and is about six feet deep in the south part. The overland telegraph does not bring the news very steady of late owing to its extreme length, and the late storms of rain and snow. It is hard to keep it in working order or to keep the poles up.

December 31st.—The city of Sacramento is still under water. Boats have to be used to convey passengers into and from the City, and costs merchants \$40.00 per ton to get goods to Breighton, a distance five miles to the nearest point on the railroad. This city looks like an immense lake. When the water will subside it is hard to say, but not until it stops raining.

We have no religious society in this place except Catholic. I am trying to live a devoted follower of Christ, but in a country like this, there are many things that tend to draw a man away from religion, but I am determined not to turn to the vain allurements of a wicked world around me. I have established a Sabbath School here, and try to give the children the best instruction I am capable of. Drinking and dancing is the chief delight of the people, who

appear very friendly otherwise. We have plenty of "Secesh" here. Many of the patrons of the school here are of that stripe, but I say nothing but think the more. Many of them are good men, but like many of their Southern friends, are terribly fanatic.

If I conclude to stay a year or two, you had better let Americus (a nephew) come here, and I will secure him a school at a salary of \$800.00 per year, if he is well posted in school teaching. That is much better than he could do there.

*Note*—The next letter, dated over a year later, indicates a change of heart. The Doctor had been suffering from a complication of intermittent fever and homesickness, which resulted in his final decision to leave the country. His last letter is dated:

Mormon Island, April, 1861.

Dear sister Ann:

I think that Americus had better teach there awhile, and see how he likes the business, as he has not seen enough of the "traps and deadfalls" of the world to go among these heathen here in California.

My health is feeble for want of relaxation, and a little exercise. I shall have a short vacation, and try and recruit a little. Tell Albert I have not forgotten him, but cannot recommend this country as being a good place for him. He is too young to come here, but wish him well. Tell him to be steady and finish his trade, and he will do much better there than here, and I have been very homesick for a few days. Ann, if I had two or three hundred more dollars, I should come home this Spring. It is true, I can make more money here than at home. The climate is grand, but this avails nothing. I am not at home. I shall return this Fall, make up my mind to stay on my place, and be contented. I have seen as much of the world as I care about seeing. I have done middling well so far, and if I can have the good luck to get home safely, I shall try and be contented.

I was in San Francisco last week attending a State Board of Examination of Teachers, stayed five days, saw the city, and the "Elephant", spent \$15.00 and my time, and don't know as I am much better off.

*Note*—He left California shortly after this letter, returned to New York State, and lived and died in the little village of Gilberts Mills, firmly convinced that there was no other place in all the world to compare with his home.